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ABSTRACT

A study of the expectations and attitudes of adult foreign students toward their instruction in English as a second language, the classroom environment, and the extent to which the instruction was meeting their language skill development priorities also examined the teachers' perceptions of their own teaching styles and the instructional milieu and priorities. Results indicated that the teachers thought of themselves as innovative and egalitarian, with lower expectations than the students' concerning realization of language fluency. Most students appeared to be adapting well to their teachers' presentations, but some appeared to have higher goals and/or to prefer more traditional and formal leadership in the classroom. The major differences in student and teacher responses appeared in the amount of formality desirable in the classroom, the desirability of independent, group work, and the degree to which language skills must be perfected. Most students preferred studying English in the United States to studying it in their home countries. It is recommended that teachers become aware of their students' past classroom experiences, show an interest in planning learning experiences that validate past experience, to have and build confidence in their students' abilities, begin with the familiar and move to new things, and be aware of student concerns and goals. (MSE)

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AMERICAN ESL CLASSES AND FOREIGN STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

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What is language learning all about? What is the best method of teaching a second language? Which classroom activities are most helpful and which textbooks the most useful? As trained professionals, we know these questions are unanswerable. Our students who have studied English in their native countries, however, have definite feelings and opinions about these questions and may find being transferred into American classes somewhat formidable. Unfortunately, the students' perceptions of what constitutes effective language teaching, based on former experiences, is not always in agreement with their new instructor's intentions or teaching style. The result is often disorientation or resistance (Johnson, 1983).

The current trend in the TESL profession is "innovative" teaching; the tendency is to jump on the bandwagon of several alternative approaches to the more traditional methods of language teaching (Clark, 1982). Anxious to leave behind the dinosaurs of ALM and grammar-translation, teachers experiment with myriad ideas from Silent Way, Total Physical Response, Community Language Learning, Natural Approach, Suggestopaedia, St. Cloud Method, Rassias' Method, Situational Reinforcement, Stylized Mnemonics, Structured Tutoring, etc. The combinations that await the foreign student are many, varied, and unexpected.

In addition to the great variety of new methods, materials, and teaching philosophies that the ESL student may encounter, classroom organization, skills development priorities,

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and the intentions determined by the teacher may also be unexpected by the students (Mickelson, 1983). Many students, for example, who come from strict, autocratic language-learning backgrounds (ones which stressed reading, writing, and test-taking) may suddenly find themselves in a relaxed, democratic, highly oral class situation where independent and cooperative learning is encouraged, and free, creative self-expression is emphasized (Stevick, 1981).

The curriculum of an ESL class may have an inductive or a deductive theory base. It may be structured on a grammatical, situational, notional-functional, or life-skills syllabus. It might be content-centered or student-centered. The atmosphere might be formal and highly corrective, or more casual, with errors treated in an informal manner as a part of the developmental process.

Students who perceive themselves as having been successful in their early language training through traditional instruction in their native countries may resist unfamiliar practices that to them seem inappropriate, confusing or downright foolish, practices that seem to reject their previous training (Lindsey, 1977). Adult learners, especially, bring with them ideas about language-learning and teaching that may have little or no resemblance to what they encounter here in their classrooms (Curtin, 1979).

The intention of this mini-study was to explore how students in two different programs reacted to and coped with the instructional milieu of their American classrooms. We will, first, briefly explain the procedures of the study and then describe the respondents. Finally, we will detail how and where the respondents' opinions differed and offer some brief conclusions.

Instrumentation

This study utilized a survey of 42 items. One questionnaire form was given to language students and a similar questionnaire was given to their instructors. The rating method consisted of a four-point Likert-type scale. (See Table 1 for examples.) The items required that the respondents make ratings in four different areas:

1) language skill development priorities
2) learning / teaching practices
3) classroom protocol and procedures
4) classroom environment.

Additionally, the students were asked to describe their feelings during their class time in the United States by choosing from a list of positive and negative adjectives, such as: relaxed, satisfied, nervous, confused, confident, capable, etc. They were then asked to state whether they preferred their

classes here or in their native country, and why. Their instructors made ratings in the same four areas and gave brief descriptions of their teaching styles by way of four continua. The instructors were also informally interviewed after the survey was completed.

TABLE 1

Examples of survey items and rating scale

	NO	MAYBE NOT	MAYBE YES	YES
It is of value to write practice compositions.	1	2	3	4
Students need to know English like a native speaker.	1	2	3	4
It is of value to role-play in class.	1	2	3	4
Students need to read well in English.	1	2	3	4
It is of value to do language tasks with a partner.	1	2	3	4

Respondents

The survey was given to 72 learners of English and their fifteen instructors. School records indicated that the students were between the ages of 18 and 45 (with a median age of 23), from eighteen different language backgrounds, and 23 different countries. They were both men and women who had studied English previously in their native countries, and were at an intermediate or advanced proficiency level. All respondents were affiliated with an adult school or university program. The majority of the students were engaged in a conversational program, but some had plans to continue their college work here in the United States. (See Table 2)

The instructors were four men and eleven women, ages 24 to 40 (with a median age of 34), who had been teaching from one to fifteen years. Seven had masters degrees in TESL, four masters degrees in related fields, and four had BA's.

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TABLE 2

Student Respondents data

Nationality		Sex		Age	
Asian	41	Women	34	Under 20	16
European	14	Men	38	21-30	42
Latino	13			31-40	10
Middle East	4			over 40	4

Amount of ESL in Native Country		Amount of ESL in United States	
less than 1 year	23	less than 1 year	55
1 to 5 years	19	1 to 2 years	11
over five years	32	more than 2 years	5

In the survey, no teacher considered his or her class presentation as tending toward didacticism or as having a content-centered curriculum. Half reported that they taught in a classroom which, for the most part, was democratic and student-centered; half had classrooms that they considered to be equal combinations of the "didactic" and "democratic" modes. No teacher reported a tendency toward traditional methodology; the majority indicated innovation and experimentation in their methods.

Subsequent interviews with the instructors revealed that the areas of their "innovation" fell into the following categories:

1) integration of the arts into the language curriculum
2) assumption of responsibility by students
3) real-world emphasis
4) frequent use of humor and "play"
5) a personalized, informal class environment

Many of the teachers emphasized the development of personal initiative and cooperative group work in the learning process. For example, students were asked to write their own exams and quizzes, to self-correct, to peer-correct, and to evaluate themselves and their classmates. They were allowed to observe themselves in some classes, through the use of videotape. They were assigned problem-solving and inquiry tasks that required partnership and small-group sharing of information. They were encouraged to help their classmates and to ask for help in return. In many cases, the students chose the topics for discussion, and in some classes they were asked to determine how they would learn. Several teachers had an absolute "English Only" rule in the class that was student-enforced.

Regarding the integration of the arts, many teachers used various theater/drama techniques to build oral simulations in the classroom; role-play seemed to be highly emphasized by all teachers. Visual art was employed in at least two different ways: objects of fine art (or reproductions of them) were brought into the classroom to stimulate discussion and writing, and students themselves were asked to draw pictures based on an assigned theme. This student-created art work was used to cue oral work and journal writing that were relevant to the individual student. Poetry, too, emerged in the classroom, both through the reading and discussion of works by international poets, and through the creation of free-verse, couplets, and haiku by the students. Several teachers, moreover, used visual imagery techniques to develop the learners' personal creative expression. One example of student writing was the following:

> I am like that bird
> Which has lost its neighborhood
> Because somebody caught him
> When he was in love
> I felt what that bird felt.
> I am still feeling
> What that bird felt.

Many teachers mentioned the importance of bringing the real world into the classroom, using such means as developing reading skills through text taken from newspapers and magazines and contemporary novels, rather than from specially prepared readings geared for ESL students. Guest lecturers were often invited from the community to speak to the students, and class discussions tended to revolve around current controversial issues. Additionally, to build community awareness, students were taken on field trips to businesses and institutions in their new city, and were often given contact assignments which had to be carried out within the community.

Another area of "innovation" might be called an addition of levity to each class. The students' day was broken up with periodic "relief" activities such as puzzles, games and music. Jazz Chants were used, as well as games such as Simon Says, Tic-Tac-Toe, Password, Twenty Questions, Concentration, crossword puzzles, etc. They listened and sang along to everything from Willie Nelson to Rogers and Hammerstein and two teachers even taught square dancing and calling!

Finally, during the brief interviews, several instructors spoke of their intention to establish an informal classroom environment. They tried to promote a relaxed atmosphere--one with a feel of community and an awareness of shared experience. Students were encouraged to socialize--both in and out of class: to share news and gossip, letters from home, job-finding successes and accounts of what they did in their spare time. Two

teachers used various techniques of relaxation and meditation to help students feel more comfortable, less resistant to learning, less disoriented.

Although two teachers specified that they subscribed to a "natural approach" in their teaching, and several mentioned that they had used Total Physical Response methods in working with less proficient students, most did not seem to be on any "bandwagon." They appeared to have eclectic techniques, borrowing from cognitive-code, behavioristic and communicative theories. Four syllabus designs were in use: life-skill, grammar, notional, and situational, and all four language skills were being taught simultaneously with varying degrees of emphasis, depending on the teacher or the class purpose.

Comparison of students' and instructors' responses

Table 3 indicates how students and instructors responded to the survey questions. In comparing these answers, we notice only three areas that have any significant differences. They are concerned with the following concepts:

1) the amount of formality desirable in a classroom
2) the desirability of independent, group work
3) the degree to which language skills must be perfected.

In regard to traditional classroom formality, few instructors felt that students should raise their hands and wait to be called on before speaking; all instructors would encourage their students to guess, to answer whether they were sure of the correctness of their answers or not. The students, on the other hand, were not in agreement. Half of them felt it was better for learners to raise their hands before speaking out; 37% believed that one should be absolutely sure of his or her responses before volunteering to speak.

Regarding the traditional classroom arrangement, no teacher saw value in straight rows of desks in a language classroom. Approximately one-third of the students indicated it was, indeed, a good idea.

Instructors were slightly ambivalent about the need for teachers to be in the room at all times, scoring "yes, maybe" or "maybe not" for the most part. Students, however, were adamant, with 80% calling for the teacher to be present in the classroom at all times.

The students perceived less value than did their instructors for all questions related to independent, small group practice. All teachers responded favorably (in varying degrees) to having students listen to one another as an aid to building comprehension. This opinion was shared by only 6% of the students. Moreover, all students expressed a dislike for working

TABLE 3

Mean ratings on items by students and instructors

STS	INST	
3.7	3.5	Students need to read well in English.
3.5	3.3	Students need to write well in English.
3.7	3.8	Students need to converse well in English.
*3.7	2.2	Students need to have perfect pronunciation.
*3.5	2.3	Students need to have perfect grammar.
*3.5	1.8	Students need to know English like a native speaker.
3.2	3.4	It is of value to study grammar.
3.2	3.3	It is of value to read stories in English.
2.9	3.3	It is of value to role-play in class.
3.0	3.4	It is of value to write practice compositions.
2.7	2.7	It is of value to sing or play language games in class.
3.3	3.5	It is of value to have small group conversations in class.
3.7	3.3	It is helpful when the teacher explains or talks about grammar points.
*3.5	2.6	It is helpful to read about grammar and write sample sentences.
3.3	3.6	It is helpful to practice grammar in conversation activities.
*3.4	2.8	Language tapes are helpful for learning comprehension.
3.8	3.5	Listening to the teacher speak is helpful for learning comprehension.
*2.7	3.3	Listening to other students in class is helpful for learning comprehension.
2.9	3.3	It is helpful to discuss readings with small groups.
3.1	3.5	It is good to write about external topics (history, sports, business, etc.)
3.2	3.7	It is good to write about internal topics (my family, my past, my goals, etc.)
*3.0	3.8	It is of value to have conversations with all students together and the teacher.
*3.1	3.7	It is of value to have conversation with small groups of students in class.
*2.2	3.3	It is of value to have conversation with one partner at a time in class.
3.4	3.2	It is of value to have planned assignments to talk to Americans out of class.
*2.7	1.7	Students should raise their hands and wait to be called on to speak.
*2.1	1.0	Students should not volunteer to answer unless they are sure to be correct.
3.1	3.3	Students can learn better by working in small groups.
*3.4	2.5	The teacher should always be in the classroom helping the students.
*2.2	1.1	The students' chairs should be in straight rows facing the teacher.

1 = no/disagree
4 = yes/agree

specifically with just one partner at a time, while instructors scored 73% in favor of paired activities.

Though the teachers indicated that it was important for the students to learn to read, write, and converse well in English, none of the teachers felt it was essential for them to achieve a native-like mastery of English grammar or pronunciation. Ninety percent of the students, however, disagreed markedly, seeming to perceive the perfection of these skills as a possible and reasonable goal.

The choice of where to study

Although students varied in their self-described feelings during their class time here in the United States, all but four preferred studying English here as opposed to in their native countries. The reasons they gave for this decision were not necessarily related to classroom practice, however, but reflected, rather, their initial reasons for coming to the United States and their initial expectations.

Twenty-seven students wrote that they preferred to study in the United States because of the increased opportunity of practicing outside the class. Sixteen students stated that the one main advantage was being taught English by a native speaker. Thirteen students were grateful that most Americans (and American teachers) don't know foreign languages, thereby forcing them to speak only English while they were here. Likewise, their multi-cultural classes put them under pressure to speak only English. These responses seemed to be related to expectations the students had before coming here and which were being met.

Other reasons given for preferring to stay in the United States to study may reflect more unexpected advantages such as "more varied content," "friendship with teachers," "multi-cultural interaction," "helpful teachers," "more relaxing and smaller classes," "more real language in the classroom--not only repetition."

The four students who preferred to study in their own countries seemed to be uncomfortable with what they perceived as a lack of structure or analysis in their classes here, for example: "I want to know use of words.", "I want to understand grammar.", "I want to make correct sentences.", and "I want to know system."

These sorts of comments may reflect the more familiar, and therefore, more comfortable methods of grammar analysis, abstraction, "read-write-test" processes that these students experienced in their native countries, a method that was, perhaps, less demanding interpersonally and communicatively than what they found in our classes.

Conclusion

The intention of this informal mini-study was to: 1.) determine what a selected group of students and teachers expected and desired in their ESL classroom environment, 2.) to find out how students and teachers might differ in their responses, and 3.) to know if the students were satisfied with their current classes.

To draw a general, composite picture of our learners and teachers, we might say that the teachers tended to characterize themselves as somewhat innovative and working within a non-traditional framework. They professed to using a more egalitarian, informal approach whereby students have a say in their choice of content and process of the class, and wherein student self-investment is crucial to success. They seemed to have somewhat lower, but perhaps more realistic expectations related to the students' realization of a native-like fluency.

Most students rated themselves in such a way as to appear to be adapting well to their American teachers' presentations. Many, however, did not. These unhappy students appeared to have somewhat higher personal goals related to skills development; they desired more perfect grammar abilities and near-native pronunciation. Many wanted more traditional leadership, more order, perhaps, and more formality.

The survey responses indicate that students do, indeed, often have expectations and preferences that differ in several essential ways from those of their instructors. All students, however, answered very similarly to the survey questions, despite the fact that some felt more negatively about their school experience here than did others.

Through the completion of this project, we may have drawn some implications for change within the two institutions surveyed, and possibly other institutions will want to follow suit. Do students sometimes know better than teachers what it is that helps them learn a language? Can teachers effectively give instruction in an environment where students feel uncomfortable? Should students be consulted about their preferences, expectations and needs? If researchers and educational philosophers are telling us that we need to "lower the affective filter," build student initiative, personalize lesson content, develop student-student interaction, what are we doing wrong when we find our students unhappy with our attempt to address these concepts?

As experienced, well-trained, and well-informed teachers, I believe we can have confidence in our choices of classroom techniques and environments. But we also can, and should, devise creative and subtle ways of implementing these choices in a way that causes less resistance, that is more

beneficial to the students. We may, for example, attend to various techniques employed by the social-learning model of behavior modification to help students overcome discomfort. In brief, we may need to:

1) Become aware of students' past classroom experiences and their assumptions about language learning either through surveys or through open discussion.

2) Indicate an openness, interest and sincerity on our parts to plan a learning experience that suits them and that validates their previous experience.

3) Build students' confidence in our expertise and our qualifications.

4) Be absolutely convinced, ourselves, that what we do--or have students do--is valid and efficient.

5) Give students a logical rationale behind the alternatives we have chosen to use in their learning process.

6) Begin where students are--with the familiar, and move slowly toward different practices or techniques, allowing them to gradually "desensitize" and to witness the progress they are making in their new environment.

7) Be aware of students' interests, concerns, goals; if the content is absolutely relevant, the process will seem less obtrusive.

Abraham Maslow once said, "If the only tool you own is a hammer, you tend to look at everything as if it were a nail." ESL professionals are currently polishing up their collection of tools with a fervor; one has only to open a second-language teaching journal to realize this. Our study suggests that perhaps students, too, should be given the opportunity to collect a few tools of their own along the way, and with the least stress possible, in order to fulfill their potential.

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